

## One, Two or More States in Israel-Palestine? That Isn't the Question

by Nathalie Tocci

For long, far too long, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been trapped in a perceived one-state/two-state dichotomy. This dichotomy has provided life support to the so-called Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). The irony, or rather tragedy, is that it is precisely the persistence of such process, and the time that it has provided Israel to pursue its own agenda, which has invalidated the one-state/two-state dichotomy and hampered any meaningful progress towards genuine peace. In other words, while international debates get bogged down in the sterile one/two state debate and the MEPP persists as a consequence of this, the everyday realities of Israel's deepening occupation are overlooked, providing Israeli authorities with ample time to implement – in a phased and gradual fashion – its end goal of retaining a majority of the West Bank.

The argument is well known and rehearsed. Beginning with the second

intifada in the early 2000s, a refrain gradually came about. "Time is running out for a two state solution" goes the mantra, repeated time and time again. At every meeting, conference and seminar on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2001 we have heard this eerie warning. Twenty-five years since the launch of the Oslo peace accords and 17 years since the second intifada a legitimate question arises: has time finally run out by now?

On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, many skirt the uncomfortable question, preferring instead to simply repeat the mantra. By now, the warning rings increasingly hollow. Democratic Zionists refuse to contemplate that time may have run out for a two-state solution. A democratic one-state solution between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea would mean the end of the Zionist dream. A greater Israel cannot be both Jewish and democratic they say, so if democracy is

*Nathalie Tocci is Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Honorary Professor at the University of Tübingen, and Special Adviser to EU HRVP Federica Mogherini.*

to trump Jewishness as any democrat would warrant, Zionism would be forever lost. Many Palestinians and pro-Palestinian activists also dismiss the question, claiming that a one-state solution would merely legalize and legitimize the current apartheid reality. Therefore, a one-state solution would enshrine Israel's Jewishness at the expense of democracy and Palestinian rights. In short, a democratic one-state solution is viewed as either undesirable or unrealistic by most.

Because of the dead-end reached by these arguments and the sheer terror that in the absence of a clear political perspective the conflict would again spiral into unmanageable violence, we are back to square one: time is running out for a two-state solution; there is no one-state solution; long live the two-state solution. Consequently, the so-called MEPP, ostensibly aimed at reaching the long-sought two-state solution is kept artificially and rhetorically alive by scores of well-meaning and cynical, idealistic and desperate politicians, diplomats, academics, activists, journalists and more.

The paradox though is that it is the perceived dichotomy between one and two states that keeps the comatose MEPP artificially alive, while it is precisely that process which has provided the necessary time and space to enact a "solution" that is neither one-state nor two. The existence and persistence of the MEPP has invalidated the one-state/two-state dichotomy by allowing 25 years (and who knows how many more to come) in which Israel has methodically set

the basis for a "different" solution. By gradually expanding its web of occupation and control in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, successive Israeli governments have been setting the stage for the eventual annexation of large swathes of the West Bank – at a minimum the over 60 percent constituting Area C of the occupied West Bank, which is directly controlled and administered by Israel. Palestinians can then be "free" to live in the remaining 39 percent of the West Bank (the totality of which, together with the Gaza Strip, already represents a mere 22 percent of mandatory Palestine). They may enjoy limited forms of autonomy within these scattered bits of territory and would certainly never be granted political rights in Israel, as that would imperil the "Jewish" character of the state. And halas, if so they wished, the Palestinians could even call themselves a state (or an Empire for that matter). But the truth is that Palestinians would never have anything that approximates the most far-fetched definition of a state, while Israel, from the Jordan to the Sea, would continue to consider itself both Jewish and democratic. Would such a "solution" last forever? Probably not, given the long-term unsustainability of injustice inflicted upon Palestinians. Would it be corrosive to Israel's democracy? Certainly, as indeed the last 50 years of occupation have been. But it would be dishonest to deny that such a "solution" could last many years, and that it represents the worst possible outcome for all those committed to a just peace.

The perceived one-state/two-state dichotomy has fed the MEPP. But the never-ending MEPP has demonstrated

that such a dichotomy is indeed false, opening the way for another "solution" taking root on the ground. In other words, if the MEPP has provided the diplomatic and political cover for Israel to pursue a very different "solution" on the ground, and if such "solution" is inimical to a just peace, it follows that the MEPP is a contradiction in terms: the "process" has become an enemy of "peace".

In light of this, openly disavowing the perceived one-state/two-state dichotomy would invalidate the logic underpinning the harmful MEPP by cutting short the time Israel still believes it needs to formalize its very different type of "solution".

For a very brief moment, it looked like the unlikely champion of this much needed expression of political honesty was none other than the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Back in February, Trump nonchalantly broke a taboo, declaring his indifference to a two-state or one-state solution.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, that off-the-cuff remark was quickly set aside, and did not spark a dynamic that could have shifted the sterile one-state/two-state debate into a more meaningful conversation about the conflict. Persisting in the empty mantra of a two-state solution, Trump unleashed his son-in-law Jared Kushner to pursue the ultimate Israeli-Palestinian "deal". The very fact that this happened in many ways reconfirms

<sup>1</sup> The White House, *Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Conference*, 15 February 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/15/remarks-president-trump-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-joint-press>.

how badly Israel needs the MEPP dance to live on: time is what Israel needs before it feels it can formalize through annexation a solution it has been relentlessly pursuing since 1967.

Decades of US-led diplomacy demonstrate that political courage is unlikely to come from the United States. Certainly not from an administration that is so personally, politically and ideologically attached to the current Israeli government. If it does not come from across the Atlantic, should it and could it come from Europe instead?

Historically Europe demonstrated the political courage to go against the grain, declaring back in 1980 its support for Palestinian self-determination.<sup>2</sup> It was partly if not largely thanks to that moment of political courage that the "two-state solution" has gradually become the mantra of the international community. What is needed today is not disavowing two-states only to embrace a one-state paradigm instead. What is needed is not a reaffirmation of a false dichotomy but rather the transcending of that dichotomy altogether. In other words, what is needed is the political courage to declare that the number of states is really not important, but rights and governance in the greater Israel/mandatory Palestine are. These dimensions will be far more consequential to peace. What is needed therefore is to refocus all political and diplomatic energy towards the conflict (and not the peace process).

<sup>2</sup> European Council, *Venice Declaration*, 13 June 1980, [https://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice\\_declaration\\_1980\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/docs/venice_declaration_1980_en.pdf).

Rechanneling economic assistance away from the Palestinian Authority and towards civil society, sustaining word and deed Palestinian reconciliation and deepening the rules-based bilateral relationship with Israel and the Palestinians are all practical steps in this direction. And finally, as a footnote, reformulating the title (and mandate) of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the MEPP into an EUSR for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would add political honesty and avoid perpetuating the dangerous diplomatic dance we have all fallen prey to for far too long.

*22 November 2017*

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, IAI does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Working Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest COMMENTARIES IAI

- 17 | 27 Nathalie Tocci, *One, Two or More States in Israel-Palestine? That Isn't the Question*
- 17 | 26 Alessandro Marrone, *Permanent Structured Cooperation: An Institutional Pathway for European Defence*
- 17 | 25 Dimitris Bouris and Daniela Huber, *Imposing Middle East Peace: Why EU Member States Should Recognise Palestine*
- 17 | 24 Andrea Dessì, *Europe and the Israel-Palestine Conflict: A Call for Coherence*
- 17 | 23 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Can the Africa-EU Partnership Be Revived?*
- 17 | 22 Riccardo Alcaro, *Weakness, Low Cunning and Stupidity: Trump's Iran Deal Calculus*
- 17 | 21 Jean-Pierre Darnis, *The Future of EU Defence: A European Space, Data and Cyber Agency?*
- 17 | 20 Aldo Liga, *The "Israel Factor" and the Iraqi-Kurdish Quest for Independence*
- 17 | 19 Davide Cancarini, *Like a Bull in a China Shop: Uzbekistan Traces a New Foreign Policy Direction*
- 17 | 18 Guillaume Lasconjarias and Lukáš Dyčka, *Dealing with the Russian Bear: Improving NATO's Response to Moscow's Military Exercise Zapad 2017*